

**STATEMENT
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS AND FORESTS
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
UNITED STATES SENATE
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CONCERNING**

**S. 1442, THE PUBLIC LANDS SERVICE CORPS ACT OF 2009,
AMENDING THE PUBLIC LANDS CORPS ACT OF 1993**

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Barrasso and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on S. 1442, the Public Lands Service Corps Act of 2009.

INTRODUCTION

On April 2, 2009, the Department testified in strong support of H.R. 1612 at a hearing on the House of Representative version of the current bill. The Department strongly supports S. 1442. This bill would strengthen and facilitate the use of the Public Lands Corps program, helping to fulfill the vision that Secretary Vilsack has for reconnecting people to the land by promoting ways to engage youth across America to serve their community and their country. We have much work to do in restoring our forests, some of which can be achieved through the robust partnerships that this bill creates.

PUBLIC LANDS SERVICE CORPS ACT OF 2009

S. 1442 would strengthen and improve the Public Land Corps Act by making several administrative and programmatic changes that would encourage broader agency use of the program, as well as foster opportunities that are more varied for young men and women. The amendment would also enhance participant support for Corps enrollees during and after their service. Appropriately, S. 1442 would change the program's name to Public Lands *Service* Corps, reflecting an emphasis on "service."

Most projects implemented by the Forest Service's Volunteer¹, Youth² and Hosted Programs³ in the national forests and grasslands are designed to address needs for maintenance and ecological restoration, while providing a service-learning opportunity for the enrolled youth. We fully expect those types of projects would continue to be

¹ Youth aged 15 to 18 e.g. YCC

² Domestic and international

³ Conservation partnerships with non-governmental organizations

completed under S. 1442. However, this amendment specifies a broader range of potential projects, making it likely that Corps members would become involved with the varied activities of the Forest Service mission including the Deputy Areas for Forestry Research and Development, National Forest Systems, State and Private Forestry and Business Operations.

FOREST SERVICE HISTORY AND INVOLVEMENT WITH CORPS AND YOUTH

Beginning in 1933 with Camp Roosevelt, the first Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp located on the George Washington National Forest, the Forest Service has had a long and robust association with youth and young adult conservation corps. Indeed, the Forest Service Job Corps Program, authorized by Congress in 1964, is modeled after the CCC of the 1930(s). The Forest Service operates this program pursuant to an agreement with the Secretary of Labor.⁴ Since enactment of the Youth Conservation Corps Act of 1970 (Public Law 91-378), the Forest Service has sponsored the Youth Conservation Corps for young men and women age 16 through 18, who complete service-learning projects on National Forest System lands. Many current agency employees, inspired by their service-learning and association with the Forest Service, initiated their career aspirations through involvement with the Youth Conservation Corps.

The Department regards the Public Land Corps program as an important and successful example of civic engagement and conservation service for the Nation's youth. National Forest System lands are a place for Public Lands Service Corps participants to learn and practice an array of conservation, preservation, interpretation and cultural resource skills. Indeed, in forty two states and Puerto Rico the Forest Service has already benefited greatly over the years from the service and volunteer work on National Forest System lands.

One example, the Rocky Mountain Youth Corps (RMYC), headquartered in Taos, NM, annually enrolls nearly 150 at-risk youth and has a long-standing partnership with the Carson National Forest. Through the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program (CFRP), authorized by Public Law 106-393, and designed to involve citizens and youth in the management and care of national forests and grasslands, 30 RMYC Corps members recently completed a three-year thinning project on the Carson National Forest. The purpose of the project was to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, thereby making the area safer for homes and people. Throughout the project, Corps members' received tangible training and experience. Many of the enrollees could go on to careers in forestry, wildlife and natural resource management.

Our second example is from the summer of 2009. The Wyoming Conservation Corps (WCC), housed within the University of Wyoming's School of Environment and Natural Resources, engaged more than 40 young people to clear dead trees from trails and

⁴ Under the authority of the Title I-C of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which generally authorizes the Job Corps program, the Department of Labor transfers funds to the Forest Service to operate its Job Corps Centers.

campgrounds on the Medicine Bow National Forest. The service work was performed to make trails and campgrounds safer for visitor use and enjoyment. Following their experience with WCC, many of these young people expressed an interest in pursuing careers in land and natural resource management.

A third example is the Northwest Youth Corps. For over 20-years, the non-profit, community-based organization in Eugene, OR, has been a partner with the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and other natural resource and land management agencies. This collaboration has provided service-learning opportunities for over 10,000 youth.

IMPLEMENTATION AND EXPERTISE

S. 1442 would grant the Secretary the discretion to establish residential conservation centers to include housing, food service, medical care, transportation, and other services associated with residential living arrangements. The Forest Service is uniquely situated to play a key role in the coordination and management of the residential conservation centers for the Public Lands Service Corps through its Job Corps Program. The Forest Service Job Corps Program would likely be the coordinating office for Public Lands Service Corps residential conservation centers in the Forest Service.

The Forest Service Job Corps Program has the institutional capacity to operate residential facilities successfully. However, there are a number of implementation issues that need to be considered in establishing new residential conservation centers. These include the costs of operating and maintaining the facilities, potential liability issues, and questions about the impact on contract and labor laws and the need for a structured behavior management program to ensure the health and safety of students and staff. In implementing the residential living centers authorized by the act, we intend to work closely with the Department of Labor to ensure that any new responsibilities and activities undertaken by the Forest Service Job Corps Program will neither divert Job Corps resources nor detract from carrying out the existing Job Corps program mission. In addition, we would appreciate the opportunity to work with the sponsors and the Subcommittee to address these implementation issues in the bill.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Department of Agriculture welcomes S. 1442, which would increase the opportunity for Public Lands Service Corps members to leverage their education and work experience in obtaining permanent, full-time employment with Federal agencies. By completing service-learning projects in the Public Lands Corps, a skilled cadre of young and diverse natural resource professionals would be available to meet some of the staffing needs of agencies. Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee this concludes my prepared statement. I am happy to answer any questions that you or Members of the Committee may have.